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TAGS: [TBIO](#) [EAGR](#) [KFLU](#) [CASC](#) [MO](#)
SUBJECT: AVIAN FLU: NO TIME TO PANIC

REF A) 05 Rabat 2532; B) 05 Rabat 2432; C) 05 Rabat 1848

(U) This cable is sensitive but unclassified. Please protect accordingly.

11. (U) Summary: Although no cases of Avian Influenza have been detected in Morocco, the malady has many Moroccans quaking in their boots. The issue regularly dominates front page news, rumors of outbreaks circulate at lightening speed, and consumption of chicken has plummeted, putting the \$1.4 billion industry in jeopardy. The GOM has engaged in a vigorous public information campaign to reassure the public that it has the issue well in hand. Pictures of the Prime Minister eating chicken on television and in the newspapers have boosted demand and spared the industry further damage. Agriculture officials are taking training in the United States to strengthen the Ministry's diagnostic skills, and in spite of a continued high state of alert among the Moroccan population, Embassy continues to have confidence in the GOM's preparedness. End Summary.

12. (U) Fears of an avian flu outbreak are keeping newspapers busy and the government running hard to counter rumors with an extensive public information campaign. Prosecutors opened an investigation on Feb. 27 against seven people accused of spreading tales of avian flu infection at a hospital in Rabat. If the charges are proven true, the perpetrators risk five years of prison.

Chicken: Cheep Cheep

13. (U) The poultry industry - which generates \$1.4 billion annually and employs 230,000 people - has been hit hard, losing \$60 million since the start of the pandemic. In a move meant to reassure the public about the safety of eating chicken, Prime Minister Jettou paid a highly-publicized visit Feb. 22 to a poultry farm 25 miles north of Rabat, during which he ate chicken on camera and repeatedly insisted that the government had done its homework on the disease. Jettou paid a similar media-heavy visit to an industrial abattoir 15 miles south of Casablanca on Feb. 25.

14. (U) The government's campaign appears to be bearing fruit. After initially plummeting to less than half its normal value, the price of chicken has steadily climbed back up to around \$1 per kilo, still 30 percent below average but

an improvement from the 65 cents per kilo it was attracting weeks before.

Suspension of Imports

¶15. (U) Morocco has banned the importation of all poultry products from avian flu-infected countries, as well as domestic birds from anywhere in the world. On Feb. 27 the GOM mandated indoor confinement of poultry on farms located within two miles of wetlands sites used by migratory birds, and began vaccinating non-confinable birds like ostrich, duck and pheasant.

Half a Million Potential Vectors

¶16. (U) At the nexus of Europe and Africa, Morocco lies in the path of nearly 200 species of migrating birds that pass through the territory twice a year on their way north and south between the two continents. An estimated 500,000 migratory birds will pass through Morocco during the next two months.

¶17. (U) To counter this threat, surveillance teams from the Department of Water and Forests are patrolling 44 wetland areas frequented by migratory birds, looking for unexplained deaths or other abnormalities. In early February, 300 egrets were found dead at a lake in central Morocco, prompting a deluge of fearful press. Authorities tested the birds and found no evidence of infection. Two Ministry of Agriculture officials are currently in Aims, Iowa, taking training in laboratory diagnostic techniques to strengthen the GOM's ability to detect and respond quickly to the virus if and when it appears in Morocco.

¶18. (SBU) Comment: In spite of a fearful populace and an active press, the GOM appears prepared, poised and unruffled. While responding to a full-fledged pandemic would severely test Moroccan capabilities, Embassy avian influenza team continues to have confidence in the GOM's commitment to detect and promptly inform the public in the event of an outbreak within its borders. End Comment.